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A look at the history of boarding schools

In my day as a youngster, boarding at Prep school was idyllic – despite (or perhaps because of) a very strict headmaster who we feared greatly, terrible food eaten in an old cow shed, and cold showers twice a day – even in a Nottingham Road winter.

We built tree houses, had ‘clay-laaitgie’ fights, slid down near cliffs on cardboard go-karts, built dams, invented our own version of real life Monopoly, had endless friends always on tap, bunked out of the dorms at night to visit the haunted house on the neighbouring farm.

One of the features that have maintained across the years of my experience is how difficult it is to get daughters and sons admitted into good boarding schools. Tales of children being booked in at birth have persisted for as long as I can remember.

This brings to mind the question I was recently asked at a School Management meeting I attended.

‘What is the difference between an angry prospective mother who finds out her child did not gain admission to the boarding school of her choice and a Pitbull?’

The lipstick

It was only after the Chairman of the South African Schools Boarding Council had wined and dined me, that he dropped the minor bombshell that I should address his wonderful conference which was held in July last year.

‘We are going to look at Boarding past, present and future’ – he remarked. ‘We want to go right back to the really early days of Boarding schools, and thought it would be good to have someone like you to talk about how it was in the absolute beginning like when you were a boarder yourself at Clifton and Michaelhouse.’

Well I took that in the spirit it was offered, and so there we were and here you are tonight.

Boarding Schools have had an interesting and sometimes a murky past.

In amongst the earliest examples of formal education the Ancient Greeks and Romans employed very lowly slaves called ‘Paedagogi’ to accompany the sons of the household to attend at the local school from about the age of seven to learn gymnastics, wrestling and running, as well as some simple arithmetic, reading, writing, drawing and music.

It was the task of the Pedagogue slave to ensure that the boy tried hard at his physical endeavours, learned his work as well as his manners, and how to behave in company.

It hasn't changed much; the slaves are still at it.

Of course the quality of the learning and development depended much on the relationship between boy and slave, and the quality of the slave's leadership, even from a position of rank disadvantage.

Although the boys travelled to school each day with the slave, even at home the slave and child were often housed separately from the rest of the family - a small beginning for the boarding concept.

Plato, the great Greek philosopher, had written that "a boy is the most unmanageable of all animals" so the Pedagogue had to be seen as severe and stern, and was not beyond the use of a thick stick to enforce his authority. So was formed the archetype of the housemaster to be for the next twenty or so centuries.

Girls, it appears, were neglected in the world of formal education from these earliest of civilised times. They were looked after and taught necessary womanly skills by their mothers. On reflection perhaps they had the best of the deal.

The practice grew of sending children to other families or to schools so that they could learn together is of very long standing, recorded in classical literature going back over hundreds of years.

In medieval times in Europe, a notion of sending boys to be taught by literate clergymen or noblemen developed, so they left home to live either in monasteries or as pages in great households. Schools called Cathedral schools or Monastic schools developed but were dissolved together with the monasteries around the 12th century under Henry VIII reign over England.

The school often considered the world's oldest boarding school, a model that was ultimately exported around the world, was The King's School, Canterbury. It was founded around 597 AD.

In another England town called Winchester, where it is said the legendary King Arthur had ruled over Camelot, a Bishop, William of Wykeham, began the great work of his life – to erect and endow a College for seventy poor scholars who would live at the College and study. These seventy poor scholars were the sons of merchants, squires, farmers and burgesses.

The boys had to be between 8 and 12 years when admitted; of good behaviour, apt to study, and well versed in reading and song. The spirit of the College was set out in a Latin Phrase which freely translated apparently means - "Work, Walk or be whacked."

Winchester College founded in 1382 and Oswestry School founded by David Holbache in 1407 are said to be the oldest boarding schools in continual operation.

Reading for this talk I uncovered quite sordid and uncomfortable material about the history of Boarding Schools in some countries.

In 2007 the United Nations commissioned research on the role of Boarding Schools and their function in perpetuating colonial control over the indigenous peoples of those countries.

Indigenous communities had argued that the historic purpose of Boarding Schools had been to assimilate the indigenous people into the dominant society of which they lived.

Such schools were administered in co-operation with Christian Missionaries with the expressly stated purpose of the children being converted to Christianity. This was especially true of Latin American, Central American, Arctic and Pacific countries.

Variations of this existed in the USA and Canada to deal with the so-named American Indian problem where children were forcibly removed en-masse from their homes.

The policy was "save the person, kill the Indian."

New Zealand and Australia, USSR, Scandinavian countries and China were noted to have adopted similar policies.

The report reveals that in all these schools the children were required to drop their mother tongue and to speak only English or the language of the country of which it had become a colony, and were primarily prepared for lives of menial labour to serve colonial or invading masters.

Sexual, physical and emotional abuse was rampant in these schools. Children were forced to beat other children. This continued in many places right into the 20th century, with officials refusing to investigate complaints.

The United Nations report refers to an example where the FBI found in Arizona USA in 1987 a case of one teacher who had abused over 140 children. Other cases of inhuman treatment were being investigated as recently as 1990.

Allegedly, and I quote " ... thousands of children have died in these schools through beatings, medical neglect and malnutrition. "

In Canada reports of overcrowding leading to tuberculosis were numerous on record. In an

industrial school in Saskatchewan 69 children died of TB in one decade at the end of the 20th century. In a 1990 report 100% of children in some of these schools had been found "to have been sexually abused. "And so the horrible truth is revealed of what is a serious black mark on an institution in which probably all of us here believe to be potentially so positive. "

And so to look at Boarding!

In the 19th century, the British boarding schools perfected the system of oppression and bullying that would provide grist for many an author.

George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh have portrayed boarding school life as being filled with freezing showers and cold porridge. But J K Rowling in the past recent times has helped, with the cosy picture she presents in her books.

With the popularity of Harry Potter novels, the number of children applying to boarding schools world-wide has apparently risen; many of them hoping to find their own version of Hogwarts. However, others have interpreted this trend as a reaction to longer working hours and the break-up of more marriages.

In fiction boarding schools are sometime presented as one long midnight feast with pillow fights forging firm friendships. However, their opponents claim, the reality is extended homesickness, a lack of individual attention and nothing much learned but the ability to survive a lack of privacy and bad food.

Modem boarding schools have done much to shed the image of boring rations and mass dormitories with 40 or more beds in one room; some going as far as providing Jacuzzis and on-suite bathrooms to private rooms. Similarly, they make great claims for their academic merit, particularly in light of the increase of exams, coursework and university entrance requirements facing children wishing to succeed in the modem world.

Alongside these more conventional schools, two types of boarding schools have also become more prevalent recently. Sports academies and stage schools seek to cater for children with particular interests and talents, while so-called 'troubled-teens' have been able to turn to a range of religious or wilderness schools to solve their problematic behaviour.

Girls were not exempt from the privations of normal home comforts; novelist Charlotte Bronte described icy dormitories, bad food and rampant disease that, in real life, killed two of her sisters.

It was Evelyn Waugh, I believe, who suggested that anyone who had been to a boarding school

will always feel comparatively at home in prison.

An extraordinary book came my way a few years back that helped me to retain what little sanity remained after a few years of house mastering and head mastering in boys' boarding schools.

The book is very aptly titled "The Hothouse Society." It claims to be "an exploration of boarding school life through the boys' and girls' own writing."

We read from the research how children see routine, authority, problems, housemistresses, housemasters and matrons – as well as their fellow inmates.

Setting the scene is an extract describing very early boarding. At Eton in AD 1440 boys were roused at 5 a.m. when their dormitory door, which had been locked to keep in the 80 boarders for the night, was opened. They chanted prayers while they dressed, and were at their lessons by 6 a.m. They had two meals a day - and none on Friday, a fast day - and lessons ended at 8 p.m., when they went straight to bed. They did have an hour off, during which they played an early version of soccer "with a bag full of wynde."

Perhaps it has lightened a little over the years - listen to an unedited version of what the children in the research say -

A 15 year old girl writes: We are woken by an Unsympathetic matron and the blankets are pulled off - I hate this hell; they don't have any feeling. At 10 to 8 we have shoe inspection and if they are in a bad mood they say our shoes are B awful. I hate this.

14 year old boy writes:

Woke to the sound of the Housemaster's voice. Oh hell, he is in a bad temper again as usual; he must have had another row with his wife.

A sixteen year old boy writes in his diary: Wake up at 6.25. Aaargh. Bloody morning run in 5 minutes. Got a full bladder but no time to do anything about it.

Clang, clang, clang. 5 more seconds then up. I am in a curious state of non-thought. Out of the door, ooh its cold and raining. Lovely. Say hi to Tim – run together move on you bugger. Back and into the shower, the brain is numb. Dress and downstairs.

Into breakfast - cram down toast and milk without thought at all - talk to Mark about sex - what's the matter with him, can't he understand things properly? Now the brain starts to thaw out as you wait for chapel. I'm thinking about Penny and long slim legs in silk. The bell – damn, now for 20 minutes of the chaplain. Sing hymn without really concentrating. Thinking about sex. Out of chapel - what was the chaplain talking about? I seem to be in a doze half the time and the full shag hits you, 4 bloody lessons in a row. You feel very tired because you never get enough sleep. Collect your books. Where's my pen? Suddenly for very little reason you want to cry - don't be silly you can't cry ...

That extract sounds decidedly like some thoughts I, or many of my colleagues of the time, might have had as a sixteen-year-old as a young boy.

Of course I never swore, loved all my lessons and teachers, and even listened to the chaplain. However, life was tough, many of our teachers in the 1950's had returned from a terrible war. Discipline, in all its shapes and forms, was the order of the day.

But I left very proud and privileged to have been there.

Michael Cassidy, known to many of you as the founder and inspiration behind Africa Enterprise was my head of house here for a year. He tells the lovely story of our Housemaster for that year, who was a much loved character, a war hero, an author, an Anglican priest and leader of the Torch Commando which developed the United Party. When Head of House Cassidy knocked on his door one evening to ask if he could please discuss some house matters he went in. "Yes Boy, come in. Now what is your name and who are you and what do you want?"

What a difference when I returned as Rector some 40 years later. I was handed a school by Rector John Pluke that oozed care. Staff demonstrably cared for boys and each other; boys cared too for each other. A new kind of comradeship and brotherhood prevailed. It was still a tough place as many define toughness, we won more than our fair share of games, but an ethic of care had arrived under the guidance of Rectors Pennington, Jardine and Pluke. They gave the lead to many great staff members to transform the school. This kind of transformation was of course true of almost all the great Boarding Schools of the time.

Some years previously I had undertaken a study tour of the mighty boys' schools in England and I had been able to spend time with the legendary Eric Anderson, who had markedly changed Eton College. When I spoke with him and asked of his vision for the school he told me of an Eton

where every Don

cared about every Don and every boy, and every boy cared about every boy and every Don. To find this resonance with the school I was to lead was both exciting and also more than a little scary lest I fumble the pass.

This care ethic was about teachers, and particularly boarder staff, who were really concerned about the children, dared to love them as their own 'in loco parentis' families, and didn't spend their waking hours devising disciplinary measures as their priority. It was about adults in school who really understood their roles. This is what legitimizes the promise of safety, enhanced character development, really meeting children's educational needs and care for the individual that the notion of a great boarding school must make.

Tim Jarvis was speaking at a school meeting a few weeks ago when he told us about Headmaster Dr Anthony Seldon currently at Wellington who demanded from every Housemaster that he should know what any boy is doing on any afternoon, and as well the following afternoon. Contrast with the experience that Mike Cassidy and I had.

It is very probable that modern boarding schools today provide an advantage as it pertains to safety, strong adult figures, and an ethos built upon timeless values.

Care must not be mistaken for a lack of organisation, proper processes and harmonious institution living – care creates those very much better than force.

Sometimes one wonders though if some aspects of change go too far.

I had the experience of a Michaelhouse boy, who for his gap year after matriculating here, went to a prestigious Prep school in England whose Headmaster was also incidentally an Old Boy of this school. The youngster discovered that ante-abuse legislation included that every child had to learn the local child-line number off by heart - 0800666666.

He told me that on one morning he was put in charge of an unruly bunch. When he struggled to settle them down he threatened - "Stop it there at the back or I will come and give someone a jolly good smack." Immediately the whole class started chiming together 0800 666 666.

In recognising our potential in excellence for education, we remember that the material we work with is wonderfully made. Girls will be girls and boys will be boys. May I share an

experience that House leaders and Heads of Schools will readily associate with?

It was a Monday morning, and I had arrived at my desk wondering what a Boarder weekend would demand of my time. Sure enough on my desk was an envelope marked in a very neat hand "For the urgent, confidential and private attention of the Head Master." On opening it I recognised that it came from the school janitor - a man of distinction who in his retirement wanted to help at the school.

"Dear Headmaster" it began. "You will remember that I have told you that I was a prisoner of war during the later years of the Second World War. In that terrible camp it was the rebellious, spirited and naughty that hassled our captors, kept us alive, and ultimately helped us escape. They were products of schools like this.

On Saturday I discovered where some of your boarders have created a smoking den. They have made it very comfortable, and it is not likely you will ever find it. Now you may instruct me to take you there where you will be able to identify all of them from their signatures on the wall, so that they can be suitably dealt with, and of course I will.

On the other hand you may choose to instruct me to close off the entrance and ensure that the den is no longer usable, so that a group of spirited lads can continue their entrepreneurial and innovative ways to grow up as men like those I fought with. I await your instructions Headmaster."

What would you have done? Me too.

And so to the future.

Many of our Principals travelled last year to Helsinki to try to find out why Finland claims to have the best schools in the world. They found a mix of autonomy and excellence that had been created in education, relevant to that country's culture.

A conference recently in Orlando USA, attended by a Principal friend, has blown her very experienced and well educated mind, with its emphasis on co-operative learning; on how much time we spend telling children to SIT DOWN and SHUT UP when they learn best when they are active and talking.

One of our boarding schools, borrowing from the remarkable success of a Danish model, has run an outstanding experiment for the past four years. Selected boys plan their own timetables, choose which lessons they attend, select the teachers they wish to have help them, and when,

and where, and how they want that help. In each of the past years many of the boys concerned have completed the syllabus within half a year, and all involved reveal the benefits of the freedom and autonomy involved.

How can we make a difference and ensure that those we work with, and those who follow after, will make a significantly positive contribution to improved, innovative and relevant education through the unique medium we have in Boarding Schools?

In order to pursue this, I would like to invite you to watch this short film clip from the 1968 film about a British Boys' Boarding School title IF.

It tells the story of a House that deteriorates to utter chaos and makes for an excellent case study. In essence we can deduce a part of the cause as we watch the first house meeting of the year addressed by the housemaster.

IF

Did you notice the accent on discipline, the lack of concern for the fate of new boys, the uncontrolled and apparently condoned power of the prefects, as well as the internal bullying, and the belief that character development resides in a kind of survival.

level of the Boarding School- from Head Teacher to House Mistress and Housemaster, to Matron, Coach, Tutor or Duty person and to the girls and boys at every level?

How can **we** make a difference?

Well what has it been down the years and what is it now, world-wide, that lends to significant difference amongst people and organisations?

For what are Mother Theresa, Princess Di and Margaret Thatcher remembered with respect and awe? Why are the names Mandela, Churchill and Lincoln invariably linked to gratitude and praise? Well simply because they led. Not managed, not ruled over, not organised, not controlled, but led.

They knew the power of winning hearts and minds; they knew they could not achieve anything without the permission to influence that their followers gave them, they know that no person can ever really control another to everyone's benefit.

Writings on leadership can be traced to the third century BC from when the words of Lao Tzu have become justly famous:

A leader is best,
When people are hardly aware of his existence,
Not so good when people praise his government,
Less good when people stand in fear,
Worst, when people are contemptuous.
Fail to honour people and they will fail,
And they will fail to honour you.
But of a good leader who speaks little,
When the task is accomplished, the work done,
The people say "We did it ourselves."

May I respectfully suggest that one of the most important issues, is the imperative and means to produce worthy leadership at every level of the Boarding School – from Head Teacher to House Mistress and Housemaster, to Matron, Coach, Tutor or Duty person and to the girls and boys at every level?

Leadership is developed best by example and rich experience. Opportunities for these have to be carefully created and crafted, monitored and mentored.

Historians and academics, indeed parents and concerned citizens who recognise that our future lies in today's education, need to provide all the support and guidance possible to ensure our children receive what they deserve.

Thank you for this opportunity to share this aspect of schooling with you all.